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ABSTRACT

Communication may be complicated in the kind of complex polyethnic interaction setting that is part of the Australian educational scene. In a polyethnic school, breakdowns in communication can occur from interference not recognized by either the teacher or the student. Interference may occur because the cultural grammar of the child may not mesh with the grammar of the person transmitting the message due to subconscious differences in body language or an unfamiliar mode of communication (e.g., different understandings of nodding the head). At a deeper level, the iconic nature of communication (transmitting incomplete information that the receiver is expected to be able to fill in) and field dependency/independency (cognitive styles more or less dependent on cues from the surrounding field such as peers or parents) also affect transmission of information. On a further level of abstraction, learned styles of processing information and dealing with learning contexts may cause interference in communication. Yet another source of interference may be related to different forms of communicative grammar related to the difference between religion and the domain of secular, academic tradition. (TJ)

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Riddles in intercultural communication. A view from structural anthropology

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Riddles in intercultural communication

B.M. Bullivant

In this paper I will start by assuming that for all here the major concepts of intercultural communication pose few problems. Thanks to the efforts of your leading theorists in this field — some of whom will be present at this conference — we are now thoroughly familiar with the central ideas of communication through such key concepts as culture, symbol, sign, kinesics, proxemics and so on. Indeed, it is probably quite presumptuous of me in such a gathering to try to rework these central ideas, but there may be some profit in discussing the communication riddles that can occur in the kind of complex polyethnic interaction settings which are now a familiar feature of the Australian educational scene. These are found in primary, secondary and even tertiary institutionalized agencies in which persons from a range of culturally different social groups are present in the sort of situations conceptualized by Fiedler and associates (1971:96) as leading to 'hetero-cultural encounters'.

My attempts to grapple with their complexity were initially in the general area of migrant education. More recently they have focused on studies of polyethnic schools and I will draw upon this type of research for the majority of the examples for this paper. But the proverb — 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread' should warn all academics against the dangers of theoretical complacency and premature closure of ideas. There are still many riddles in communication to be explored. In this paper I invite your participation in such an exploration.

It has a dominant and recurrent theme incorporating many important principles for us based on the work of Edmund Leach (1976:2) one of the new school of structural anthropologists following Lévi-Strauss. '[All] culture communicates; the complex interconnectedness of cultural events itself conveys information to those who participate in those events'. This will occupy our minds in what follows.

The complexity of the polyethnic composition of Australian society and culture is producing numerous problems of intercultural communication

which embody similar principles. Statistics are seldom convincing but this much can be said: some hundred or more ethnic languages, dialects and nationalities have been identified in my state, Victoria, alone. In high migrant density areas such as central Melbourne, some classrooms can have a mix of children from over twenty different cultural backgrounds. In Australia, with a total population of about 14 million people, there are about 1½ million whose first language is not English. Immigrants or children of immigrants constitute about twenty five percent of the population. This proportion is growing and its ethnic composition is changing with immigrants from Asian and Latin American catchment areas replacing those from traditional sources in Europe and Great Britain. In addition we have some 133,000 Australian Aborigines of various degrees of mixed or pure blood with over seven hundred possible tribal affiliations and a great variety of languages. Not to belabour the point further, Australia's polyethnic composition is highly complex and infinitely challenging. It also poses acute dilemmas relating to the ethics of research.

One of its more recent features is the ethnic school movement. These are schools run by ethnic communities which operate mainly in the evening or on Saturdays to give children training in the communities' languages, traditions, history and other cultural features. There are, in addition, a small number of schools which cater for both the culture-maintenance programmes of their supporting ethnic communities and attempt to prepare the children for life in the wider society and its culture by providing a typical Western curriculum of the type with which we are all familiar. Several of these 'dual-ethnic' schools in Melbourne are sponsored by Jewish communities. They are of varying degrees of Orthodoxy and adherence to Judaic tradition ranging from the ultra-Orthodox Adass school, through the one I studied which adheres to the Lubavitcher (Chabad) tradition, to the big establishment following the Liberal tradition. Other schools that have dual culture maintenance are community schools for Aborigines in parts of outback Australia. We thus have a variety of schools in Australia in which hetero-cultural encounters are commonplace, but it is in what I call the dual-ethnic school where we see the most striking results of the situation so well expressed by Leach: '[All] culture communicates'.

To appreciate the ramifications of this dictum in the polyethnic classroom we need to employ some basic ideas. Let us look firstly at that much-defined concept, culture. For my purposes I take it to be a patterned system of symbolically and extra-symbolically communicated interdependent knowledge and conceptions a society has evolved from the past, and

progressively modifies, to give meaning to and cope with the present and anticipated future problems of its existence. From the type of cybernetic view proposed by Talcott Parsons, discussed by Schneider and Bonjean (1973:124) culture provides the programmes for a society's action systems. People belong to social groups not to cultures, although the latter view is all too common (e.g. Porter, 1972:3). A little reflection will show why it is mistaken — people cannot be members of (in the same set as) interdependent knowledge and conceptions. This is rather like saying that apples belong to the same set as pears. All this may appear to be unnecessarily pedantic, but the confusion between culture and society weakens our understanding of the former's function as both source of the information in any communicative act and of the patterning of the behaviours the act encapsulates and the situational context in which they occur.

It is now fairly well established in cultural anthropology that from the point of view of society the cultural programme is transmitted to each new generation through the process generally known as enculturation. This is accomplished relatively informally by institutionalized agencies such as the family and kin group or more formally by education systems such as initiation camps and schools. Both informal and formal enculturation are much influenced by the ubiquitous mass media, especially television and radio.

From the child's point of view, enculturation is a process of absorbing the cultural programme through continuous, reciprocated interactions with components of what can be termed enculturation matrices. These provide the symbolic and extra-symbolic knowledge and percepts which the child 'manipulates and masters' in Herskovits' terms (1948:310) to build up his cognitive map of socio-cultural reality or life-world. The components or situational stimuli of a matrix are people, their behaviours and governing norms, artifacts and technological components, the spatial layout or 'cultural landscape'. All of these are locked together and given direction by the society's values and value orientations.

A school can be conceptualized as either a societal agency of cultural transmission or as a locus of cultural transmutation by the child, to use Shimahara's (1970) useful distinction. The former is put into effect by the curriculum — the institutionalized strategy of formal enculturation. By the curriculum is meant a selection from a socio-cultural group's stock of valued traditional and current public knowledge.

and experiences, purposefully organized by formal enculturation agencies such as schools, and made available to pupils sequentially through 'syllabuses' and 'units'. Such a definition is deliberately couched in universal terms that make it possible to carry out cross-cultural comparative analysis of any formal agency be it a bush initiation camp or a modern high school. Each will have a curriculum.

If we leave it there, the significance of the argument in this paper is lost. It is essential to appreciate that as an enculturation matrix a school transmits a great deal more than the formal curriculum. This can be thought of in Overley's or Jackson's terms as a 'hidden curriculum'. I prefer to see it in more dynamic terms as a countervailing curriculum, which communicates messages that can negate or distort those intended in the formal curriculum. This phenomenon derives from the fact that as an enculturation matrix the school has a synergistic, gestalt quality. Everything in it is communicating information to pupils, because all culture communicates. This does not matter greatly in a school that acts as an agency for a mono-cultural society. It becomes critical in a polyethnic school and is the theoretical basis for a great many breakdowns in intercultural communication.

In polyethnic classrooms culture provides all the elements of the learning-stimulus mix which confronts children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Herein is the basis of riddles in intercultural communication, because it is not just the linguistic or para-linguistic modes that we must recognize in a learning-stimulus mix. All its components will transmit information to all those present. Some of the messages will cause few problems in cases where the cultural programme is familiar to those present. but other messages coming, for instance, from the socio-spatial context or artifacts in the mix may constitute a form of communication interference or 'noise' in cybernetic terms. This may not be too serious if those present are able to appreciate what is going on, and can filter out the stimuli that are causing the 'noise' at the conscious level. But it is more than likely that at the unconscious level 'noise' will not be recognized for what it is, a distortion to the cultural message.

So far we are on fairly familiar territory thanks to the work of such theorists as Hall (1959). But there is a further possibility, although highly speculative, which arises from Leach's work. This is his assumption

that 'all the various non-verbal dimensions of culture ... are organised in patterned sets so as to incorporate coded information in a manner analogous to the sounds and words and sentences of a natural language' (1976:10). Interference during intercultural communication may then occur because the cultural grammar of the person receiving the message may not mesh with the grammar of the person transmitting the message. It is as if the 'patterned sets' into which dimensions of culture are organized constitute a form of wavelength basic to communication. Unless persons in an information transaction are on the same wavelength, intercultural communication will be distorted, and at a very fundamental level indeed. We thus face the possibility that some of those seemingly intractable problems in intercultural communication, with which we are all too familiar, may be due to this phenomenon, what I have termed enculturation dissonance. It arises because people are so deeply programmed that a great deal of intercultural transactions operates at a sub-conscious level which is not amenable to conscious acts of choice or will.

We can thus distinguish riddles at three levels of abstraction in analysing communication. The first or surface level provides examples with which we are most familiar, i.e., breakdown of face-to-face intercultural communication because the message is couched in an unfamiliar mode, or because various forms of interference occur to negate the message. These mostly occur at the implementation stage of the curriculum at the classroom interface. For instance, in Melbourne schools with numbers of Greek children accustomed to the reinforcement of 'Yes' with a side-to-side shake of the head, quite obvious puzzlement can be seen when the teacher accompanies 'yes' with a nod — the Greek gesture for 'no'.

A teacher's body language and use of proxemics provide another source of communication breakdown. Many cases of this sort are known to occur in schools with pupils, such as Greek or Turkish boys, who associate discipline and authority with males. A cluster of interference factors can operate when the teacher is a female. This very fact in itself diminishes the boys' respect for her authority, and leads to inattention to what she is saying. This is further exacerbated if the teacher is young, progressive, and uses a democratic non-authoritarian style of teaching. Loss of respect and inattention are further, even catastrophically, increased if she sits on a table in an attempt to be democratic and wears a mini-skirt. Interestingly, boys' reactions to this are not necessarily salacious. As one Turkish boy is known to have complained in evident

distress: 'How can we learn and understand what she's saying if she's sitting on a table and showing all she's got?"

Communication interference of this type may occur because other messages are being signalled by the context 'or meta-communicative frame' the teacher has constructed (Bateson, 1973:150ff). This is a deeper level of abstraction in communication in which the subject of discourse and exchange of signals is the relationship between the speakers. At the surface level of verbal communication the teacher is saying: 'Listen to what I am going to tell you', while at the meta-communicative level, the 'frame' she has constructed by her actions is saying: 'Don't bother to listen to what I am telling you'. Unhappily, such a teacher would be blissfully unaware of the implications of what she is doing. Only very rarely would her initial training have even touched on fundamentals of group dynamics and interpersonal relations, let alone specific training in principles of intercultural communication and cross-cultural sensitivity, such is the paucity of much teacher training in Australia.

In some intercultural learning-stimulus situations in Australian schools even if full attention is paid to the meta-communicative frame, there is no guarantee that the message will get through to the listener in the form intended. For instance, a teacher who encourages some Aboriginal children to ask questions and frames her body language and spatial proximity to them in such a way as to be as receptive as possible may still not be answered in the expected way. Sayers (1977:70) has shown that among the Wik-Munkan asking questions is culturally discouraged. 'Children who ask too many questions about new and interesting things around them are considered rude and a source of shame to their family'. But it is just this kind of inquiry-based, auto-didactic learning so beloved of many Western educators that the teacher is trying to encourage. Her talk and verbal explanations and instructions to encourage children to order their thought verbally and logically may not even get through. As McLelland and Harris (1976:45) comment about Aboriginal children at Milingimbi in the far north of Australia, more naturally occurring Aboriginal learning is by observation than by verbalization. Apart from instruction in ritual knowledge, verbal explanations and directions play a relatively small role in teaching. Communication interference of this type is posing acute problems for white teachers in the network of Federally administered schools for Aborigines in what we call the outback regions of Australia.

Examples of this type may go deeper than the contravention of cultural norms or the inappropriateness of learning styles, and hint at the existence of deep and complex forms of the kind of communicative grammar foreshadowed earlier in this paper. Sayers (1977:70) notes that it is linguistically difficult to ask 'why' in Wik-Munkan. The same construction means 'from what time', 'from what place', and 'for what reason'. McLelland and Harris generalize from this and similar examples in the Northern Territory to suggest:

> In Aboriginal society, although the analytical thought process is often used (for example in analysing all the factors involved in stalking a kangaroo), probably a higher proportion of learning involves the intuitive, or trained reaction response (or "muscle memory" to borrow a term from musicology). It is probably fair to say that a high proportion of Aboriginal learning is passed on without the medium of consciously verbalizing the why's and how's and thus without fostering such questions from the learner.

At such deeper levels of abstraction we can find a number of related communication riddles. One problem in communication might be due to its iconic nature (Bateson, 1973:382 ff). A great deal of the information we transmit is signalled in an incomplete fashion on a part for whole basis, which creates the phenomenon of redundancy. 'The message material is said to contain "redundancy" if, when the sequence is received with some items missing, the receiver is able to guess at the missing items with better than random success' (ibid., p.389). But ability to fill in the gaps in a message is a matter of being familiar with the overall pattern of signals from past experience. This, of course, is a matter of cultural training. A child from a different cultural background will not be able to supply the missing information created by redundancy, and consequently may miss the full significance of the message. Other parts of it may constitute 'noise' which those who know the communication style habitually filter out as irrelevant. At the most extreme we can think of a speaker's 'ums', 'ahs', and other interjections in the category of 'noise'. A listener who does not know what these are will attach undue significance to such utterances as if they were important parts of the message.

A related feature of cultural differences in processing information is suggested by recent research by Witkin and associates (Witkin, 1977). This has been taken up by Ramirez and Castaneda (1974) who have examined different learning styles and their relationship to cultural diversity. They suggest that there is a connection between one's culture and one's

intellectual and affective behaviours, which follows the broad distinction between field dependency and field independency established by the Witkin team. The former relates to people whose cognitive styles are strongly dominated by the prevailing field, i.e., by the overall organization of phenomena and by external cues. Such people are sensitive to social cues, interested in what others do and say, are drawn to people, physically employ low social distance, and are interested in selective social aspects of their surroundings. Field independent people are those whose cognitive styles enable them to experience phenomena more or less independently of or separately from the surrounding field. Such persons are held to be more impersonal, not sensitive to social undercurrents, cool, distant, and unaware of their social stimulus value.

Recent research among Aborigines in Northern Australia (McIlwraith, 1978:32) has found that Aboriginal children's test performance improved when they were tested outdoors and in full view of adults; they were not asked personal questions and were not required to talk if they did not want to. This would seem to suggest a strong field dependent cognitive style of learning, which has obvious implications for a white teacher's attempts at intercultural communication.

The example opens up a further level of abstraction which must be taken into account. This can be termed deutero-learning, following the earlier work of Bateson (1958), subsequently elaborated in his later work (1973). As adapted by the writer, deutero-learning can be thought of as learned styles of processing information and dealing with learning contexts. Evidence for cross-cultural differences in deutero-learning was provided by the behaviour of Jewish boys who were the subjects of an ethnographic study of an Orthodox Jewish day school in Melbourne, Victoria (Bullivant, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978). They employed traditional Orthodox rote learning techniques accompanied by sotto voce verbalization and body swaying, in learning contexts which demanded reasoning ability and the application of learned information to new, problem-solving situations. It was suggested that inappropriate deutero-learning techniques would set up considerable dissonance in the boys because they were operating at a largely unconscious level and were thus not amenable to conscious attempts to reduce dissonance.

When one considers the highly complex organization and implementation of learning in this school, it is possible to speculate about the existence of two competing communicative grammars. In essence the school comprises two enculturation matrices in which cultural transmutation is being

attempted by the boys. Although the secular/sacred distinction is disputed by many Orthodox Jews, for convenience we can refer to the sacred matrix empowered with the transmission of the Great Tradition of Orthodox Judaism, and the secular matrix transmitting an academic tradition of learning along conventional and rather old-fashioned, Arnoldian pedagogical lines. Each matrix is virtually self-contained. There is some overlap in common use of rooms. Apart from this, teaching materials, books, teaching staff, time-tabling, display material on walls, symbolic artifacts such as the mezzuzah, and all other components of each matrix, are virtually separate. In effect, the boys move through a Janus-type cultural interface between the two matrices, but because of the double use of rooms, face exposure from the influences of the secular matrix when doing religious work and vice versa. At this point we can recall Leach's dictum. '[All] culture communicates' and must ask what effect might this almost unique arrangement of the total curriculum have both on learning effectiveness and intercultural communication.

At the conscious behavioural level examples of interference to communication abound. In a geography lesson appropriate to the secular matrix with its body of knowledge and teaching paraphernalia my statements about the age of a piece of Silurian rock I was demonstrating produced an almost automatic negative response. This was to the effect that the rock could not possibly be as old as I claimed because the Bible says that the world was created nearly six thousand years ago. It was futile to pursue an argument on the matter, and it would be dropped by tacit agreement.

Artifacts used in the learning-stimulus mix would cause communicative interference or draw themselves to one's attention so that a very obvious duality operated. Books are the classic example. To the Orthodox Jew, a holy book must be treated with respect, to the extent that no 'inferior' book, particularly a secular one should be placed on top of, say, the Chumash (Pentateuch). Although Hebrew books were a permanent feature of most classrooms, and lay in apparent disorder on my table, the disorder concealed a clear 'message' which I did not understand but the boys did. I learned the message only when I casually tossed some of my secular books on top of what were to me indistinguishable Hebrew books, and was quickly reproved by several boys nearby. When I carelessly repeated my gaffe several weeks later, it was sufficient only for a boy to hiss 'Chumash' and shake his head to communicate to me the error of my ways. But I should have remembered: the book itself was communicating to me by its very presence,

yet, through haste or carelessness, I did not understand the message.

The exact point at which boys transferred from one matrix to another could easily be observed, often as a quite beautiful series of 'message-bearing', interconnected, cultural events, to recall Leach yet again. During secular free-study periods some boys might finish some piece of religious work. A boy would be seen reading intently, eyes moving from right to left across the page. He rocks gently backwards and forwards in his seat, often crooning softly and monotonously in unison with the rocking. He turns the pages from 'back to front'. Wearing his yarmelke (skull cap) and tzitzis (tasselled cotton vest), which might just be visible beneath his shirt, the boy is the epitome of the young yeshivah bokher (academy student) one reads about in such classics as Life is with People. The Culture of the Shtetl (Zborowski & Herzog, 1952) or The Promise (Potok, 1967).

Then comes the beautiful moment of transition which communicates so much so eloquently. The boy finishes reading. He closes the book gently, lifts it to his lips and kisses it reverently. Then he puts it away in his desk face up, to indicate that he has yet to finish it (face down would indicate that he had). He gets out his secular books and starts to read from left to right -- no rocking, no crooning. The pace of work is different, and the whole intangible atmosphere is different.

Display material on classroom pinboards would communicate different messages often in an amusing and quite bizarre way. My research was done at the time of the first moon landing. For days the small boys had been cribbing time from free-study periods to make drawings of denizens of outer space or cut out magazine photographs of the space craft. These were pinned up alongside religious pictures showing the tribes of Israel and the Ark of the Covenant assembled at Sinai: two messages, about two quite different worlds.

One might change the scene for a moment to recall the Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory school where blackboards would contain similar conflicting messages. These could be drawings of quite familiar bush animals such as the kangaroo or goanna their parents might be hunting, juxtaposed with glossy tourist pictures of Sydney or Melbourne, towns that they would never see, and which might be as alien to them as the moon landings were to my Jewish boys.

When we come to analyse these examples within a framework of communication theory and structural anthropology it is quite apparent that

Leach's dictum still holds, despite Dell Hymes' (1967:19) caution about making too free an association between all culture and communication. But I would like to take analysis further into a more speculative area and expand on the idea that communication in the school that I studied follows two forms of communicative grammars. These are almost, but not entirely, mutually exclusive and their juxtaposition in the school provides an added dimension to the riddles of intercultural communication which face the observer. In short, he can never be entirely certain which grammar is operating in which domain, although he can be more certain that the domain of the Great Tradition will be using its own grammar. He is less certain about communication in the domain of the secular, academic tradition.

These speculations take their direction from the distinction Leach makes between two types of communication (1976:9-16). These in turn rest on the difference between sign and symbol, which are two subsets he distinguishes in the category of signum. 'A signum is a sign when there is an intrinsic prior relationship between A and B because they belong to the same cultural context'. Such a relationship Leach calls metonymy, i.e., one in which a part stands for the whole. Its essence is one of contiguity.

A symbol on the other hand is a signum in which there is no intrinsic prior relationship between A and B, i.e., A and B belong to different cultural contexts and their relationship is non-intrinsic but based on asserted similarity. They are mainly metaphoric. In sum, then, Leach makes the following association to which he returns time and time again: symbol/sign = metaphor/metonymy.

In a paper of this limited scope it is not possible to go into further refinements of these concepts. I should like to suggest briefly how they might be used to explain the communicative grammars to which I have referred. The Great Tradition, I would suggest, is based on a metaphysical epistemology in which knowledge, being God-given through the Pentateuch and all that has flowed from it, can be communicated only through an elaborate and complex series of metaphors. The language and other communication modes associated with the Great Tradition are thus symbolic, but, it is clear that both boys and religious staff treat them as if they are metonymic. That is, the relationship between the symbol and what it refers to (A and B) is taken to be contiguous rather than arbitrary. In the academic tradition, on the other hand, knowledge is largely empirical. A great deal of verbal communication is through linguistic signs in which their relationship to the objects and events of the real world is intrinsic.

Unless an observer in such a situation understands this basic distinction, I would suggest that he is unlikely to appreciate the full meaning of the 'complex interconnectedness of cultural events' that he is witnessing. For instance, how might he interpret the action of the boy kissing the book and then putting it away face up ? It is obviously symbolic, and to interpret it as a sign of something (metonymy) would be a fundamental error. But what exactly is the metaphorical connection in this case ?

Any structural analysis to get inside the boy's mind at this point is likely to be highly simplistic and most likely wrong, but it could go something like this. (1) Kissing in many Western societies is a symbol (sign ?) of love, affection and respect; (2) I am reading a book in a setting devised for serious study and in the approved Judaic manner (swaying, verbalization etc.); (3) The book contains the holy words of God; (4) To show my love and respect for Him, I kiss the book.

Of course, the boy will not analyse what he is doing in this way, but I would suggest that the observer must if he is to fully appreciate the significance of the communication. At this point Leach's (1976:41) comments are worth quoting in full as they express more clearly than a paraphrase the essence of the riddle:

> Because the analysis is bound to take a verbal metonymic form, with one thing following after another, the overall impression is one of enormous complexity and total disjointedness. But what actually <u>happens</u> is that the participants in a ritual are sharing communicative experiences through many different sensory channels simultaneously; they are acting out an ordered sequence of metaphoric events within a territorial space which has itself been ordered to provide a metaphoric context for the play acting .... But the analyst must take each dimension by itself, one at a time, and it then becomes almost impossible to give a really <u>convincing</u> account of how the different superimposed dimensions fit together to produce a single combined message.

The dilemma is a familiar one to most of us — how to bring the 'inner logic' of the communication we receive to the surface in a form of 'reconstructed logic' which matches the original as closely as possible (Cicourel, 1973:29 ff). In a way, this is the ultimate riddle in intercultural communication, and even structural anthropology may not be able to provide all the keys by which it can be solved. It would be quite presumptuous to aim otherwise, but at least it may suggest extra

dimensions to be considered in any understanding of those interconnected events, both linquistic and non-linquistic, which constitute the raw material of our science.

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